

5

Evaluations

AN EVALUATION IS, QUITE SIMPLY,
A JUDGMENT ABOUT A GIVEN
TOPIC, AN ARGUMENT SHOWING

that something is good or bad, fair or unfair, desirable or undesirable, or better or worse than something else. Writers of evaluations give clear, appropriate reasons (typically referred to as *criteria*) to justify their judgments and present specific details to show how well the topic meets (or fails to meet) certain criteria. Throughout history, people have been making value judgments in every aspect of their lives. In our society, typical value judgments might include "Professor X is a good teacher," "That movie is not worth seeing," and "The organization's plan for raising money is a smart idea." Sometimes an evaluative comment is little more than an effort to blow off steam: "That test was ridiculously unfair!" Was the test really unfair? Maybe it was. But maybe the speaker is just asking for a little sympathy or expressing frustration that was actually caused by failure to study for the test.

In other cases, however, evaluations are intended to be taken seriously, and the evaluator presents criteria that he

"A high-quality vanilla ice cream should be mild but not bland, sweet but not overpoweringly so. The dairy should be balanced with a vanilla-bean, quality vanilla-extract, or other real vanilla flavor."

— Consumer Reports,
"Cream of the Crop"

or she believes can serve as a reliable basis for someone else's decisions and actions. In this chapter, you'll be learning how to write this more complex type of evaluation—and to understand the effects your evaluation may have. An evaluation may lead to a decision or action that is relatively trivial: "I guess I don't need to go see that new movie." But often an evaluation can have substantial consequences, affecting people's reputations, careers, or finances—think, for instance, about letters of recommendation, job-performance reviews, course evaluations, or product reviews.

If it is true that evaluations can have serious consequences for others, it is also true that they can have serious consequences for people who write them. A habit of making careless or thoughtless value judgments can cost people credibility, friendships, status, promotions, or jobs. For everyone's sake, then, an evaluation has to possess certain attributes.

- It should be balanced, acknowledging both good and bad and avoiding oversimplification.
- It should be honest, not deliberately ignoring details that challenge one's judgments and being forthright about the criteria underlying those judgments.
- It should be useful, providing readers with a sound basis for thinking and acting.

How can you make sure your evaluations are balanced, honest, and useful? First, you have to think carefully about the audience and purpose for the evaluation and carefully ground your judgments in fact. But facts rarely speak for themselves. Any effective evaluation must be based on criteria that help people answer questions of value.

Addressing Questions of Value and Criteria

People may evaluate any number of things, including products, people, policies, situations, literary works, works of art, films, and musical or dramatic performances. But all evaluations come down to one basic question of value: Is the thing—a product, for example, or an idea, a movie, or a policy—good or bad, worthy or worthless, desirable or undesirable, fair or unfair? This basic question of value may take several different forms.

- Is this thing as good as something else?
- Is it as good as someone expected or hoped?
- Is it as good as it might have been?

- › Is it as good as promised?
- › Is it as good as someone needs it to be?
- › Is it as good as a particular set of standards requires?

Answers to questions such as these depend not only on careful observation of facts, but also on the use of clear, appropriate *criteria*—the reasons that underlie your judgment about whether something is good or bad, fair or unfair, and so forth.

General Sources of Criteria

The criteria you use as a basis for your evaluation may come from several different sources, and their persuasiveness may vary from one audience to another. As you choose from the following general sources, consider the kinds of sources your particular audience will be most likely to find convincing.

- › **The evaluator's own needs and values.** A novice computer user might evaluate a piece of software on the basis of one criterion: ease of use. A more experienced computer user might rely on multiple criteria, such as excellent graphics capability and compatibility with other sophisticated technology.
- › **An abstract moral or legal code.** Most legal and ethical systems frown on such acts as lying, cheating, and stealing. So in evaluating, say, a course of action, someone might ask whether that course of action violates a particular legal or ethical code. If so, that course of action is wrong or at least questionable.
- › **The goals or practical needs of an organization.** If a fraternity places high value on winning at intramural sports, any plan for recruiting new members will probably be judged in terms of how likely the plan is to attract new members with exceptional athletic ability. If the fraternity is currently facing academic probation, any plan for increasing membership will almost certainly be judged in terms of how likely the plan is to attract members with strong academic records.
- › **The culture—the shared assumptions and practices—of a group or a larger society.** Some businesses, for example, assume that they must continually change if they are to stay competitive in their fields. Consequently, when it comes time to evaluate employees, these companies may value risk-taking and innovation. Employee evaluations are likely to focus on whether employees propose new projects or more innovative ways to carry out existing projects, even if these proposals entail some degree of risk. Other companies, however, are conservative, placing more value on avoiding risk and maintaining an established routine. When these companies evaluate employees, they may ask how well a particular employee follows established procedures or whether the employee's proposals minimize risks to the company.

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Exercise

Think about one type of evaluation that all students routinely encounter: grading. List some of the criteria usually used in grading. What, for example, are some reasons an instructor might have for saying that someone's work is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, or better or worse than another student's work? Identify some of the sources of these grading criteria.

Next, answer the following questions about grading.

- › What do you see as some of the main purposes institutions have for assigning grades?
- › If grades were abolished, would it be possible to accomplish those purposes in other ways?
- › How do you think grading fits into the culture of your educational institution overall and with student culture in particular?

Evaluations in Context

Context is always important when you express a value judgment. Assume, for instance, that you and a friend are walking across campus, talking about an exam you have just taken. Both of you think the exam was extremely difficult—maybe even unfairly so. If forced to, you and your friend might admit that you probably shouldn't have waited until late last night to begin studying. Nonetheless, both of you may make some rather harsh value judgments about the exam and maybe the instructor as well. Your evaluations may or may not be fair, but you are expressing them in the relatively safe context of a private conversation with someone who shares your experience and perspective. You may speak freely, and since you are speaking rather than writing, there is no public record for others to examine or challenge.

In other situations, however, your evaluations will be written and subject to public scrutiny by people who may or may not share your feelings and experiences and who may have a direct, personal stake in what you say. In writing such evaluations as these, you are, in effect, moving into a larger and more complex context, one in which your words may have consequences—some of them unexpected—not only for your audience but for yourself as well. You will need to think carefully about key elements of this context: the audiences you intend to address, the circumstances in which they will read your evaluation, and the purposes you hope your evaluation will accomplish.

Audience

If you are evaluating a subject that matters to your intended audience, you will have to be particularly attentive to your audience's values, feelings, and personal experiences. Readers will, of course, want factual information. But judgments of what is good or bad, fair or unfair, wise or foolish, desirable or undesirable are rarely made solely on the basis of facts. Individual personalities, needs, and personal (or cultural) value systems always come into play. You may not need to worry too much about this if your evaluation exists in a very limited context (as with a close friend), where you are writing or speaking confidentially to a single individual with whom you share many experiences and attitudes. But as a general rule, you cannot automatically assume that members of your audience will be working from the same knowledge base as you are or that they are operating on the basis of the same criteria you have in mind.

The success of your evaluation will depend in large part on your ability to base your evaluation on criteria that matter to your audience. For example, if you are reviewing a restaurant for readers of a college newspaper, your criteria might include cost, size of portions, and speed of service. For subscribers to a magazine about fine dining, on the other hand, appropriate criteria might include atmosphere, the chef's training, and the extensiveness of the wine list. Remember: people may draw their criteria from different sources, ranging from their personal needs to the larger culture in which they live. Don't assume that an audience sharing some characteristics with you will necessarily share your sources of criteria. Even if you and your audience are members of the same social group, some of your readers may, for example, be operating with criteria drawn from a religious system that you may not know well.

You also need to consider whether you are likely to have a secondary audience for your evaluation—a person or group of people who are not your primary audience but who may nevertheless be interested in or affected by what you say. A hypothetical example of a secondary audience would be an instructor who happened to overhear you complaining to a friend about the unfairness of a test. A more typical example might arise when you are asked to evaluate the performance of a peer—a classmate, perhaps, or a member of an organization to which you belong. You may intend for your evaluation to be heard or read only by the person who asked you to do it, especially if your evaluation is negative. But word has a way of getting around; comments get repeated, and copies of texts get e-mailed and passed around. As you work on your evaluation for this chapter, make sure your comments will stand up to careful scrutiny by people who are not your primary audience but who might be affected by those comments.

➤ For help with analyzing your audience, see pp. 304–305.

Circumstances

People are most likely to read an evaluation when they are in circumstances that create a pressing need or motive for seeking out someone else's judgment on a question of value. Perhaps they are about to make an important decision or are uncertain of how they feel about an event that has just occurred or an era that is just ending.

The specific decisions your audience wants to make may be trivial (whether to see a particular movie, for example) or profound (whether, for instance, to hire, promote, or fire someone). Time demands may be pressing ("We must have an answer on this by five o'clock today") or virtually nonexistent ("This old car probably will run a while longer before it starts costing too much money in repairs"). Sometimes a reader's decision may have direct personal consequences ("If I say this business plan is good, am I going to lose my job if it fails?" or "Am I going to be able to look this person in the eye if I say his or her efforts aren't good enough?"). Whatever your audience's circumstances may be, you'll need to assess them carefully to ensure that your evaluation relates directly to the circumstances that matter most to readers.

Purposes

In some evaluations, writers seem to want to get something off their chest, perhaps by ranting or by "flaming" or lashing out at someone on the Internet. But for most of the writing you will do in college and your career, it's not enough simply to vent your own feelings by expressing strong judgments about good or bad, fair or unfair, sensible or foolish. In both college and career, your primary purpose in writing an evaluation is to present value judgments that readers will see as *credible*—based on criteria they accept and illustrated with factual statements they see as accurate, fair, and reliable. However, you can modify this purpose somewhat by deciding just how strongly you want to argue for the evaluation you are making.

One purpose of the reviews in the magazine *Consumer Reports*, for example, is to enable readers to form their own conclusions about consumer goods they test and rate. Although reviews usually make very clear judgments, the reviewers do not argue strongly for their conclusions. Instead, they use not only written text but also graphs and other visuals to lay out in painstaking detail the criteria and evidence underlying their evaluations. This combination of written and visual information helps readers assess for themselves the validity of the judgments in any given product review.

Other evaluative pieces (such as restaurant reviews and commentaries on social trends) are more forthrightly persuasive; the authors are

likely to have a very strong opinion or reaction and may want readers to share that opinion or reaction. They may use words, details, and criteria that they know will evoke an emotional response in readers. For example, in expressing his disapproval of e-mail, one author in this chapter wants readers to share his pain and feel his annoyance. Consequently, he uses such words as *arrogance*, *prose at its worst*, and *overwhelm*. He also focuses on aspects of e-mail that his readers—principally adults well into their careers—are likely to find objectionable.

How strongly should your evaluation express your personal feelings or reactions? That depends in large part on your topic and what your audience expects from your review. If your audience wants experimental data on the crashworthiness of a particular SUV, you should probably omit reference to your personal reactions and be as objective as possible in presenting information about how the vehicle fared in crash tests. If, however, the audience is interested in how the vehicle looks and how pleasurable it is to drive, your personal reactions can probably play a larger role in your evaluation.



For Collaboration

Bring to class an evaluation of a topic (a movie, a product, a restaurant, a college policy) that interests you. Think about whether the author seems to be trying to persuade readers, evoke an emotional response in them, or produce some other reaction. Share your evaluation with one or two classmates and, working together, identify the purposes of the evaluation each of you brought in.

Visual Information in Context

Typically, evaluations supplement written text with visual information, if only a set of symbols to indicate how good something is; stars, for example, are often used to indicate whether a movie or a restaurant is excellent (four stars) or terrible (one star). Other evaluations make much more extensive use of visuals, including pictures, pull quotes, sidebars (inset boxes), and tables. The kinds and amounts of visual information will vary widely, depending on the topic and the context for which the evaluation is written.

Using visual information well in an evaluation helps readers find answers to their questions, persuades them of the writer's credibility, and

› For more information on the effective uses of these visual elements, see Chapter 8.

Questions to Ask When Reading Visual Information in Evaluations

conveys a coherent attitude toward the topic. Of course, visuals may be unclear, inappropriate, or irrelevant, so you should take care to choose visual information wisely for your evaluation.

To anticipate what your readers will need in terms of the visual information you include in an evaluation, consider the following questions:

- › Do the visual elements help the intended readers understand and accept your evaluation of the subject?
- › Do the visual elements help readers see how the subject relates to their values?
- › Do the visual elements meet (or fail to meet) the criteria derived from those values?
- › What does the visual information reveal about your understanding of readers and the topic?

You can answer these questions for your own projects by reading a variety of evaluations and thinking about page layout; images; and charts, graphs, maps, and tables.

• Does the layout (arrangement) of the page or screen make it easy for the intended readers to find the information they want or need?

- › What kind of information dominates—visual or verbal?
- › Are there headings? If so, do they give a clear idea of the information that will appear in the text that follows each heading?
- › Are there visual elements, such as sidebars (inset boxes) or pull quotes? If so, do they highlight key pieces of information? Do they help readers distinguish between different kinds of information?
- › Are there variations in the size and style of type? If there are variations, what functions do they serve? Does type appear in color?
- › How many columns are there? What sorts of publications are likely to use this number of columns? Does the width of each column make the text easy to read?

• If there are images (photographs, diagrams, or other illustrations), what questions do they answer? What information and attitudes do they convey? How likely is it that readers will recognize these attitudes?

- › What kinds of details are included in each image? Are any significant details missing? Does the picture contain extraneous information?
- › What viewing angle is represented? When the person or object is shown as if the viewer is looking up at it from below, this viewing angle usually makes the subject seem important, powerful, or threatening. If the perspective is that of looking downward, the angle tends to make the subject seem weak or unimportant. If the image lets viewers look head-on, the position is usually one of equality.

- › What colors are used? Is there anything surprising or distinctive about them? Warm colors such as red and orange tend to evoke strong emotional reactions and a sense of danger or urgency, whereas cool colors such as blue have a more calming effect. Also, dark colors suggest something sinister or gloomy, and pastels suggest innocence, childhood, or safety.
- › What kinds of lines and shapes are apparent? Diagonal lines can suggest movement or threat; jagged lines often create tension or anxiety. Tilting, top-heavy, or pinched shapes can also evoke negative emotional reactions. Other lines and forms can suggest balance and stability.
- › Is the subject depicted in a physical setting? If so, what does that setting imply about the subject or the people associated with it?
- › Is the image clearly explained through the use of a title, a caption, or accompanying labels?
- › Can the reader find a clear relationship between the image and the text?
- › Are the attitudes suggested by an image consistent with the judgment expressed in the written text?

• **If there are charts, graphs, or tables, how useful and informative are they?**

- › Does the chart, graph, or table help readers see how the subject of the evaluation (usually some sort of product) compares to other subjects and how well the evaluation measures up to a set of criteria?
- › Does the visual contain answers to the kinds of questions the intended audience is likely to ask?
- › Can the reader easily find the most important information?
- › Is the chart, graph, or table clearly labeled and, if necessary, explained with a title, legend or key?
- › Are the units of measurement clear and consistent? If symbols are used, is their meaning clear?
- › Is the chart, graph, or table clearly related to the text?



Exercise

Bring to class an evaluation that presents information in a visually interesting way. It might contain images (photographs or drawings), graphs, and tables. Or it might make special use of text by setting it off with columns, with color, as pull quotes, or boxed in sidebars, for example. Consider the effects these visual elements create by answering the questions listed on the preceding page. Then try to determine how these effects are created. Be prepared to explain how the visual elements create a particular effect and how they add to the impressions conveyed through the evaluation's written text.

FIGURE 5.1
Visual Elements in
"Cream of the Crop,"
an Evaluation in
Consumer Reports



● **Image** Photo highlights one of the favored kinds of ice cream (explained in the accompanying caption).

● **Layout** Words and images are grouped into a single unit.

● **Layout** Headings make the table and other parts of the spread (two-page layout) easy to distinguish.

● **Layout** The table dominates the spread, emphasizing the results of the evaluation.

● **Chart** Depicting "flavor and texture" scores as bars of different lengths, the chart facilitates the comparison of different products.

● **Table** Carefully chosen units of measure help readers make meaningful comparisons.

● **Layout** Subheads help readers find specific information quickly.

Ratings Ice cream

Overall Ratings Within types, listed in order of flavor and texture score

Product	Flavor and texture score	Container size	Half-cup serving	Comments
VANILLA ICE CREAM				
1 Breyers A CR Best Buy	8.5	1/2 gal. 236 150	9 g.	Big, fresh dairy, notable cream, and distinct real vanilla flavors. Slightly icy, a slightly thinner melt than most, no gumminess.
2 Häagen-Dazs	8.5	pt. 73 270 18	Big full dairy with a notable cream flavor, very distinct vanilla flavor with a strong alcohol note, hint of egg. Very dense, creamy smooth, with no gumminess.	
3 Ben & Jerry's	8.5	pt. 73 250 16	Full dairy with a notable cream flavor, very distinct real vanilla flavor with a distinct alcohol note, hint of egg. Very dense, little gumminess.	
4 ShopRite Premium A CR Best Buy	8.5	1/2 gal. 18 160	8 Big, fresh dairy and distinct real vanilla flavors. Noticeably icy with a thinner melt than most and no gumminess.	
5 Breyers Light	8.5	1/2 gal. 24 130	4 Distinct vanilla flavor, very sweet. Slightly thinner melt than most and little gumminess.	
6 Sensational Premium	8.5	1/2 gal. 21 150	8 Distinct real vanilla flavor. Little gumminess. (Sold at Stop & Shop, Giant, Bi-Lo, Edwards, and Tops.)	
7 Blue Bell Homemade	8.5	1/2 gal. 29 180	9 Distinct vanilla flavor with a harsh alcohol note.	
8 Newman's Own	8.5	qt. 48 170 10	Overpowering vanilla flavor with a caramel-like note, imitation vanilla flavor, very sweet.	
9 Dreyer's Edy's Homestead	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 140	7 Slight cooked-milk flavor with a caramel-like note, imitation vanilla flavor, very sweet.	
10 America's Choice Premium (A&P-owned stores)	8.5	1/2 gal. 19 150	9 Slightly low vanilla flavor. Somewhat light and airy.	
11 Breyers Homestead	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 150	8 Slight cooked-milk flavor, very sweet. Somewhat light and airy.	
12 Dreyer's Edy's Grand	8.5	1/2 gal. 21 140	6 Very sweet. Somewhat light and airy.	
13 Prestige Premium (Winn-Dixie)	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 160	9 Very sweet.	
14 Turkey Hill Premium	8.5	1/2 gal. 17 140	8 Low dairy flavor. Light and airy, noticeably thick, gummy melt.	
15 Publix Premium	8.5	1/2 gal. 20 180	9 Low dairy, poor-quality vanilla flavor, very sweet. Light and airy, noticeably thick, gummy melt.	
16 Publix Premium	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 150	8 Low dairy and vanilla flavors, slight chemical note. Somewhat light and airy, noticeably thick, gummy melt.	
17 Albertsons	8.5	1/2 gal. 28 160	10 Low dairy and vanilla flavors. Somewhat light and airy, noticeably thick, gummy melt.	
18 Safeway Select Premium	8.5	1/2 gal. 28 170	10 Low dairy and imitation vanilla flavors, very sweet. Somewhat light and airy, thick, gummy melt.	
CHOCOLATE ICE CREAM				
19 Häagen-Dazs	8.5	pt. 73 270 18	Big full dairy with a notable cream flavor, very distinct chocolate flavor with a smoky note, a bit less sweet than most. Very dense, creamy smooth, with no gumminess.	
20 Dreyer's Edy's Grand	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 150	8 Very distinct chocolate flavor with a smoky note.	
21 Prestige Premium (Winn-Dixie)	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 170 10	Very distinct chocolate flavor, a bit less sweet than most.	
22 America's Choice Premium (A&P-owned stores)	8.5	1/2 gal. 19 140	8 Slightly thin melt.	
23 Publix Premium	8.5	1/2 gal. 19 160	9 A bit less sweet than most.	
24 Sensational Premium	8.5	1/2 gal. 21 150	9 Slightly icy, with a slightly thin melt and little gumminess. (Sold at Stop & Shop, Giant, Bi-Lo, Edwards, and Tops.)	
25 Breyers	8.5	pt. 82 290 17	Very distinct chocolate flavor with a smoky note. Very sweet with a very slight saltiness. Streak of chocolate syrup has a hazelnut flavor.	
26 Starbucks Doubleshot Chocolate	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 170	9 Very distinct chocolate flavor. Slightly icy, with a slightly thin melt and little gumminess.	
27 Blue Bell Dutch Chocolate	8.5	qt. 48 190	10 Very distinct chocolate flavor.	
28 Newman's Own	8.5	1/2 gal. 24 190	10 Very distinct chocolate flavor, very sweet. Somewhat gummy. Has high-quality chocolate chunks that taste better than the ice cream.	
29 Dreyer's Edy's Homestead Double Chocolate Chunk	8.5	1/2 gal. 18 160	8 Slightly icy, with a slightly thin melt and no gumminess.	
30 ShopRite Premium	8.5	1/2 gal. 22 170	9 Less chocolate flavor than most. Slightly thin melt. Has chocolate chunks that taste better than the ice cream.	
31 Albertsons Chocolate Chunky Chocolate	8.5	1/2 gal. 17 150	8 Very distinct chocolate flavor. Somewhat gummy.	
32 Turkey Hill Premium Dutch Chocolate	8.5	1/2 gal. 28 150	8 A bit less sweet than most. Somewhat gummy.	
33 Safeway Select Premium Dutch Chocolate	8.5	1/2 gal. 24 110	3 Somewhat gummy. Has streaks of chocolate syrup.	
34 Dreyer's Edy's Grand Light Chocolate Fudge Mosaic	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 180	9 Very sweet. Somewhat gummy. Has mediocre-tasting slightly soft chocolate chunks and syrup.	
35 Breyers Homestead Double Chocolate Fudge	8.5	1/2 gal. 23 180	9 Very sweet. Somewhat gummy. Has mediocre-tasting slightly soft chocolate chunks and syrup.	
COFFEE ICE CREAM				
36 Häagen-Dazs	8.5	pt. 73 270 18	23 mg. caffeine. Big, high-quality dairy flavor, coffee flavor is milder than most. Slightly icy, with a thin clean melt and no gumminess.	
37 Breyers A CR Best Buy	8.5	1/2 gal. 22 150	9 8.8 mg. caffeine. Milder coffee flavor than most. Slightly icy, with a thin clean melt and no gumminess.	
38 Dreyer's Edy's Grand	8.5	qt. 37 140	9 9.8 mg. caffeine. Milder coffee flavor than most. Slightly icy, with a thin clean melt and no gumminess.	
39 Starbucks Coffee Italian Roast	8.5	qt. 50 230	33-45 mg. caffeine. Intense harsh coffee flavor with slight smoky note.	
40 Turkey Hill	8.5	1/2 gal. 20 140	8 16 mg. caffeine. Poor-quality, candylike coffee flavor.	
41 Starbucks Coffee Lowfat Latte	8.5	qt. 50 170	3 35 mg. caffeine. Intense harsh coffee flavor, very sweet.	

The tests behind the Ratings

Flavor and texture scores are based on blind taste tests by trained panelists. One product goes by two brand names—Dreyer's in the West and Edy's in the rest of the country. In a half-cup serving (4 fluid oz.), cost is calculated from

the national or regional average price of the most common container size. Calories and fat come from manufacturers' labels. Information about two-thirds of the list is saturated. Caffeine per half-cup serving, listed only for the coffee ice creams, is based on analyses in our laboratories. For the Starbucks Coffee Italian Roast, which differed greatly from sample to sample in its caffeine content, we list a range. Comments are based on the judgments of our trained panel.

Flavor and texture notes: Most of the ice creams were quite sweet, moderately dense, and had no noticeable ice crystals. Melted, they had a texture like heavy cream and a very slight to slight gumminess. Most vanilla ice creams had distinct dairy and vanilla flavors with a slight cream flavor. The chocolates generally had a distinct chocolate flavor with a milklike note, and a moderate dairy with a slight cream flavor. Most coffees had a distinct coffee flavor and a moderate dairy with a slight cream flavor.

Sample Analysis Cream of the Crop

Figure 5.1 shows two visual elements from "Cream of the Crop," an evaluation that uses visual information both to engage readers of *Consumer Reports* and to make the authors' value judgments clear and accessible. The dish of ice cream shown in Figure 5.1 should appeal to readers who have "come back to full-fat ice cream after trying to stem [their] cravings with reduced-fat products." The photograph includes details—the light glistening off what appear to be chocolate and butterscotch toppings, the generous helping of ice cream, the large red strawberry—suggesting that the ice cream depicted is anything but one of the "reduced-fat products" readers have grown tired of. The photograph also excludes certain kinds of details. We don't see where the dish of ice cream is located. Is the dish on a table at a restaurant? On a table in someone's home? Nor do we see a person, especially an overweight person, eating the ice cream. There are no details in the picture that might distract readers' attention from the ice cream or give readers second thoughts about eating it. Further, the ice cream appears readily accessible: the distance from which the photograph has been taken makes the ice cream relatively close to the reader; the angle of the dish (tilted toward the reader) also implies the ice cream is within easy reach. Finally, the dish of ice cream is given great prominence, in part by its size relative to the written

text (the photograph takes up two-thirds of the page) and in part by its size relative to the title of the article. If readers are interested in finding a full-fat ice cream—especially one that's "worth the hit" in calories—this photograph is likely to engage their interest.

The larger portion of Figure 5.1 presents a complex but clearly labeled chart that makes it easy to compare the various brands of ice cream. Within this chart is a bar graph that indicates the judges' overall assessment of "flavor and texture." Alongside the bar graph—and also part of the larger chart—is a table that enables readers to make more specific comparisons regarding the cost, number of calories, and fat content of a serving of each ice cream product. Just above the top right-hand part of the chart, a small picture of one brand of ice cream is grouped with a caption. The image both highlights and summarizes one of the basic value judgments made in this evaluation: "Häagen-Dazs, at 73 cents a serving, was consistently excellent. Breyers Natural Vanilla was excellent, too. And at only 23 cents a serving, it's a *CR* Best Buy." Beneath the chart is a box titled "The Tests behind the Ratings," which provides background information (on how tests were conducted and on the flavor and texture of most of the ice creams tested) that may interest some readers more than others.

De gustibus non est disputandum. That's Latin for a time-honored philosophical point: there's no arguing about matters of taste. Assume, that you think Häagen-Dazs is the best-tasting ice cream, but your friend disagrees. The Romans would say, in effect, "Okay. That's your taste. Your friend prefers Ben and Jerry's. Case closed." But *Consumer Reports* (CR) would say that both you and your friend might rethink your preferences, at least in terms of vanilla ice cream. CR claims that Breyers vanilla is actually the best (only by a small margin, but still the best). How can a magazine do this? After all, isn't this just a matter of personal taste? How can anybody conduct a fair evaluation of such a subjective topic?

To answer these questions, consider the following excerpt from an article in which CR reviews different brands of vanilla, chocolate, and coffee ice creams. Because the three flavors are reviewed similarly, this excerpt focuses on the vanilla ice creams.

Cream of the Crop

CONSUMER REPORTS

Full-fat ice cream is back in style. Which ones are worth the calories?

If you've come back to full-fat ice cream after trying to stem your cravings with reduced-fat products, you're not alone. The real thing is now the fastest-growing segment of all frozen dairy treats—while sales of light and lower-fat ice cream and wanna-bes like frozen yogurt have declined.

To help you find the products that are worth the calorie and fat hit, our trained panelists tasted 18 vanilla, 17 chocolate, and 6 coffee ice creams. We focused on "premium" and "superpremium" products—unofficial categories used to describe products that, according to the International Ice Cream Association, generally contain from 40 to 80 percent more milk fat than the minimum government standard for ice cream. We included several of the new "homemade style" products, which promise a

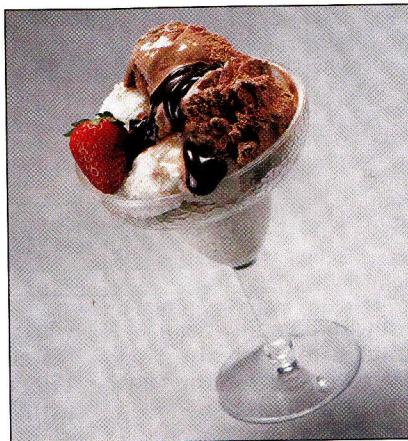
creamy taste similar to that of hand-cranked ice cream. And because limiting fat in the diet is still important, we added a "light" ice cream in each flavor to see how it would compare.

All the ice creams we tested were at least good. But only Häagen-Dazs was consistently excellent. Also notable: Breyers Vanilla and a new arrival that was too late for

our main test, *Godiva Belgian Dark Chocolate*.

Premium Taste?

The quality of an ice cream depends on what it's made of (see "Inside the Scoop") and how it's made. To make ice cream, a manufacturer pasteurizes and homogenizes milk, cream, sweeteners, and other ingredients such as gums and emulsifiers; cools the mixture; adds flavors and colors; and whips air into it as it freezes.



Too much air and too many gums can result in a light, airy ice cream; too little air makes for an extremely dense and heavy product. An ice cream's texture can also be affected by how it's handled between the plant and the store. Sharp variations in temperature, for example, can turn a smooth ice cream into an icy one.

As for flavor, here's what our panelists looked for in each category, and what they found:

Vanilla. A high-quality vanilla ice cream should be mild but not bland, sweet but not overpoweringly so. The dairy should be balanced with a vanilla-bean, quality vanilla-extract, or other real vanilla flavor. There might be a slight alcohol note from the extract. There may also be a slight egg flavor. The ice cream should be creamy smooth with little or no iciness, and it should melt in your mouth to almost the thickness of heavy cream, but with no obvious gums or thickeners.

Breyers Vanilla and *Häagen-Dazs Vanilla* were both excellent—and quite different from each other. *Häagen-Dazs* was more creamy smooth with a very full dairy flavor and very distinct vanilla-extract flavor; *Breyers* had a fresh, clean dairy flavor with a somewhat milder, high-quality, real vanilla flavor, which more than offset its slightly icy texture.

Breyers Light actually tasted better than most full-fat vanillas (though it had just 20 calories per serving less than

regular *Breyers*). *ShopRite Premium Vanilla Bean*, the best of the store brands, was a good value.

As for the “home-made” vanillas, they were nothing special. In fact, *Breyers Home-made*—which, unlike its regular brandmate, contains gums—had a generic vanilla flavor and was rather light and airy. . . .

A powerful chocolate hit

Godiva Belgian Dark Chocolate ice cream has the intense flavor of a *Godiva Dark Chocolate* bar and a texture that's a cross between a frozen ganache and a very high quality chocolate pudding. Had it been part of our main study, it would have rated excellent. But at \$1.06 per serving, it would have also been the most expensive.



The Price You Pay

Ice cream contains protein, calcium, vitamin A, and other vitamins and minerals. But there's no getting around it: With every spoonful of the full-fat products you also get a hefty dose of fat and calories. A standard half-cup serving (but

who are they kidding?) of most of the tested ice creams ranged from 140 to 170 calories, with 8 to 10 grams of fat.

The same serving of a superpremium such as *Häagen-Dazs* or *Ben & Jerry's* has about 100 more calories and twice the amount of fat.

Part of the reason is that superpremiums are denser—less air and

more ice cream. You get more ice cream per half-cup serving than you get with premiums or regular ice creams. Finish

IN SHORT

Some “homemade style” ice creams taste more processed than their regular brandmates.

Breyers Light Vanilla has a better overall flavor than many full-fat premium ice creams.

All three flavors of *Häagen-Dazs* are excellent.

INSIDE THE SCOOP A guide to ingredients

Breyers Vanilla contains just milk, cream, sugar, and natural vanilla flavor. You can't get more basic than that. Other ice creams may also be made with gums, emulsifiers, and other unpronounceable ingredients that enhance or detract from the ice cream's quality, depending on how the ingredients are used. Here are some items you're likely to find on a label:

Ingredients: Milk, cream, sugar, high fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, eggs, natural and artificial vanilla flavor, cellulose gum, vegetable gums (guar, carrageenan, carob bean), salt.

INGREDIENTS: MILK, CREAM, SUGAR, NATURAL VANILLA FLAVOR. BREYERS ICE CREAM

Sweeteners. Most manufacturers use corn-based sweeteners in place of or in addition to more-expensive sucrose (a.k.a. sugar). Corn-syrup solids improve shelf life and enhance firmness. Sweeteners such as dextrose and high-fructose corn syrup also help lower a product's freezing point, which can result in smaller ice crystals and a smoother texture.

Milk products. Whole milk and cream contribute to a rich, full, creamy flavor and creamy texture. But other milk products may play an equally important role in determining an ice cream's quality. Buttermilk can enhance the whippability during processing and contribute to a rich flavor. Nonfat milk solids con-

tain protein that contributes to a smooth texture. These milk solids may come from liquid nonfat milk, nonfat dry milk, or dry whey. While all are inexpensive sources of milk solids, nonfat dry milk may produce off-flavors.

Emulsifiers and stabilizers. Emulsifiers enhance smoothness, help keep ingredients well-blended during and after processing, and increase the ice cream's resistance to melting. Common emulsifiers include egg yolks, mono- and diglycerides, polysorbate 80, and lecithin. Stabilizers prevent ice crystals from forming as temperatures fluctuate during storage. They also contribute to a product's uniformity and smoothness and increase its resistance to melting during serving. Common stabilizers are carrageenan, guar gum, and locust bean gum. Used excessively, as in some lower-rated ice creams, they make a product unnaturally slow-melting as well as thick and gummy.

Flavorings. "Natural" vanilla flavor may come from vanilla beans, pure vanilla extract (derived from vanilla beans using alcohol), or other non-alcohol-based vanilla flavors. "Imitation" vanilla contains vanillin, a flavor component of real vanilla. For commercial purposes, it may be derived from wood pulp. Sometimes the simple term "vanilla" is used when the flavor is a combination of natural and artificial. Chocolate ice cream may contain chocolate liquor (from pressed cacao beans), cocoa (chocolate liquor minus the cocoa butter), or both. Based on our test results, the source of the chocolate doesn't seem to make a difference in quality. In the products we tested, the source of the coffee flavor came primarily from coffee extract or brewed coffee.

off a pint of Häagen-Dazs Chocolate in one sitting, which some people have been known to do, and you will have consumed 72 grams of fat—more than the government's daily recommended limit of 65 grams of fat for people who eat about 2,000 calories in a day—and 1,080 calories.

One bit of good news: Ice cream may cost a bit less this season. Last summer, a domestic butterfat shortage hiked consumer prices on high-fat dairy products, ice cream included. This year, however, there's a glut, and butterfat prices have plunged. Ice cream prices should follow suit.



STUDENT DIALOGUE: SELECTING A TOPIC

Writing in a Visual Age: What other topics did you consider writing about? Why did you decide on ROTC?

Ryan Flori: I also considered writing evaluations of the Rensselaer program that requires students to buy or rent laptop computers, as well as of popular brands of hiking shoes because my family and I do a lot of hiking. Eventually, though, I decided on ROTC because I had more personal experience and knowledge to offer about it and because it seemed a more relevant topic given current world issues.

Analyzing Context

Up to this point, you've probably been thinking about your topic from your own perspective, using criteria that seem important to you. You likely recorded your own impressions of the subject (movie, product, plan, or idea) you want to evaluate. Now, if you haven't already begun doing so, you need to start thinking about the larger context for your evaluation—the readers you hope to reach, the circumstances in which they will encounter your evaluation, and the purposes you hope to accomplish in writing for them. To develop a good sense of your context in writing an evaluation, you should write out answers to the questions that follow.

Questions for Analyzing Context

› bedfordstmartins.com/visualage
To download these questions as a worksheet, click on CHAPTER 5 › WORKSHEETS

● Audience knowledge, values, and needs

- › What sorts of experiences (personal or secondhand) have my readers had with my topic?
- › How does my topic relate to things my readers know, value, or care about?
- › Do my readers have any biases or preconceptions concerning my topic? If so, what are they?

● Audience expectations for content

- › What kinds of questions are my readers most likely to want to have answered?
- › What kinds of criteria are they likely to find important?
- › What kinds of information will they see as credible?

● Audience expectations for layout or format

- › Which reading in this chapter comes closest to looking the way my readers will expect my evaluation to look?
- › Are there any visual features (for example, photographs, charts, or bulleted lists) that my readers are likely to expect or appreciate?
- › Are there ways in which my evaluation will need to look different from the readings in this chapter?

● Circumstances

- › Are there any recent events that might motivate my audience to read my evaluation? If so, what are they?
- › If not, what sort of background information should I provide at the beginning of my evaluation?

● Purposes

- › What purposes am I trying to accomplish in writing my evaluation? (See discussion of purposes on p. 266.)
- › What sort of voice do I want readers to hear when they read my evaluation? (For a discussion of voice, see p. 320 of this chapter.)

Working on the Assignment

Analyzing Context

As you work on your evaluation, your understanding of audience, circumstances, and purposes may change. But now is the time to begin developing that understanding. We recommend that you begin your context analysis by identifying one or two specific individuals who are typical of the people you hope will read your evaluation. Then do the following.

Talk with someone who is a member of your intended audience (or who in some important ways resembles a member of that audience). Has this person had any experience with the thing (product, performance, organization) you are evaluating? What sort of experience? firsthand or indirect? positive or negative? extensive or limited? What values or criteria does this person seem to have? (If, for example, you are reviewing a movie this person hasn't seen, ask the person to describe the qualities he or she expects in a good movie.) Is this person going to live vicariously by means of your evaluation, wondering what it might be like to own a new BMW? Or is the person about to make a decision and, therefore, interested in finding the most reliable information possible? What personal consequences might your evaluation have for your reader?

Put yourself in your reader's place. Ask yourself such questions as these: *If I were a*

member of the intended audience, why would I want to read an evaluative piece on this topic? What criteria would matter to me? How would I feel if the evaluation were strongly negative or strongly positive?

Draw on your knowledge of yourself. What are the criteria that underlie your own attitudes toward the thing you are evaluating? Are there any points at which you and your audience might share some of the same criteria? What are the points at which you and your audience differ most with respect to the criteria that matter to you?

Determine the layout or format your audience will expect. Will readers expect an evaluation that looks like a conventional essay, or are they likely to prefer a Web site or a brochure? Will readers appreciate visual elements? pictures? graphs? subheadings? bulleted lists?

Imagine the circumstances in which your readers will encounter your evaluation. Will your evaluation appear as printed text or on a computer screen? What recent events might prompt readers to look at your evaluation? Have readers heard people discussing the topic and felt the need to read an evaluation? What kinds of decisions or actions are open to your audience after reading your evaluation?

Using Secondary Sources

Keep careful notes on what you learn from reading or from talking with people who know something about your topic. For the reading you do, keep a working bibliography. As you talk with people, be sure to

write down memorable comments they make, especially if these comments reflect attitudes you hear from several people. Also listen for anecdotes about their experiences with your topic.

► For more on keeping a working bibliography, see **Chapter 9**.

Identifying and Defining Criteria

One key to the success of your evaluation will be your ability to identify criteria that your readers will find clear and appropriate. In other words, you'll need to provide readers with the reasons underlying your judgment that something is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, and so forth. Here are some strategies you can use in identifying and defining those reasons or criteria.

How to Identify and Define Criteria

Strategies

Begin by thinking about your own values. If you are reviewing a movie, for example, ask yourself what matters most to you in a movie and what distinguishes a really good movie from a mediocre one. Is it realistic special effects? a plot that takes surprising twists? witty dialogue?

Examples

"Breakfast at Manory's" (p. 286) gives readers a very clear sense of what the author admires in Manory's "Big Breakfast": quantity, reasonable price, and intensity of flavors (as in the bacon that is "salty enough to disinfect gunshot wounds"). The author seems to assume—probably with justification—that his readers will also admire these qualities.

How to Identify and Define Criteria

Strategies

Consider your readers' perspective. What qualities are likely to matter to your readers? How are those qualities similar to or different from the qualities that are important to you?

Examples

Sessions seems to assume in "Ford Expedition" (p. 291) that his readers value ease of handling, safety, and comfort in an SUV in addition to performance in off-road conditions. His evaluation focuses on how the SUV handles in city driving as well as how it performs in deep sand and in steep, rocky terrain.

Define ambiguous terms by identifying the specific qualities that distinguish between good and bad examples of what you are evaluating. Ambiguous terms have different meanings for different readers. One way to define such terms is to point out contrasts that indicate exactly what distinguishes an excellent product, social trend, or idea from one that is not quite so good. (For more on pointing out contrasts, see Chapter 3, p. 159.)

In "Cream of the Crop" (p. 273), the Consumer Reports writers set out to explain which vanilla ice creams taste good. Because "tastes good" is open to many interpretations, the writers are careful to define it precisely, pointing out specific ways the various vanilla ice creams differ with respect to balance of flavor, texture, and the consistency of the ice cream when it melts.

Working on the Assignment

Identifying and Defining Criteria

- List the criteria you plan to use in evaluating your subject.
- Explain those criteria to some classmates; then ask them to identify any terms that could have different meanings for different people.
- Ask them whether your criteria seem appropriate given your subject and audience.

If you have questions about whether you need to define a particular word or phrase, ask members of your audience how they would define it. If different people in your intended audience give you the same definition, you probably do not need to include a definition in your evaluation.